
Introduction

It is estimated that approximately 20 per cent of the UK population suffers with some form of skin disease at any given time, with eczema, acne and infectious disorders (e.g. athlete's foot) being the most commonly presenting complaints to general practitioners (GPs) and dermatologists.



Approximately 15–20 per cent of a GP's workload and 6 per cent of hospital outpatient referrals are for skin problems. Skin disease is also the most frequent reason for sick leave from work and is the most common industrial disease (Gawkrodger, 1997). Yet, in a society where there is so much emphasis placed on looks and appearance, there seems to be little attention given to the psychological effects of skin conditions and the challenges faced by those who suffer from them. From dealing with staring and rude comments to thinking about how to ask the doctor for a referral, people may experience different challenges when living with their skin condition. Unfortunately however, since skin diseases are rarely life-threatening, their impact is often minimised both by family members and by health professionals. As a consequence, a person may feel that they aren't allowed to be upset or even to take time out to cope with their condition. We hope that this book will enable people to address their concerns in a constructive and helpful way. This book addresses principles that are pertinent to all skin diseases, but focuses specifically on acne, eczema, psoriasis and vitiligo, drawing on patients' accounts of living with and coping with their skin disease.

How is skin disease different from other conditions?

Over our years of experience in counselling patients in medical settings it has always struck us how illnesses (and consequently their impact) are assessed in terms of their severity. The assumption is made that the more severe a condition is, the more severe the psychological impact will be on the patient. As a consequence, skin diseases that are rarely life-threatening or physically handicapping, are thought not to pose much of a problem for those that experience them. The fact of the matter is that the severity of a condition is not directly related to how we cope

psychologically. Rather, a multitude of factors, including individual coping style, social support, illness beliefs, social stigma and past experience with the illness, all impact on how well we cope.

As with any illness, a skin disease brings on a variety of life changes and challenges that we may not be prepared to deal with. However, unlike conditions which do not change the way people look, skin problems raise a whole new set of challenges because of their visibility. The visibility of certain conditions may attract attention in social situations, thus making the individual feel that they can't keep their condition private or personal. Furthermore, owing to a lack of health education and awareness in dermatology, some people associate skin disease with contagion or lack of hygiene. This ignorance regarding skin conditions means that a skin disease patient may find that some people react negatively towards them or treat them differently because of the way that they look. In many cases the physical changes that may result from skin disease can have a negative effect on body image. Body image is our perception of the way that others see us, and therefore any sudden changes to the way that we look will have an affect on our body image.

As skin diseases are not that well known or understood by the general public, it is quite likely that people's beliefs about various dermatological conditions and the way that people cope with them might be wrong.

Counselling

So far, we have briefly looked at how people can be affected by their skin condition, we now consider how counselling can address and respond to some of these issues. In recent years, health care professionals have recognised that people with medical conditions and their families can be helped, through psychological counselling, to cope more effectively with their illness. Counselling in health care settings for people with medical conditions can specifically:

- (1) Help you understand your illness better.
- (2) Address your concerns.
- (3) Address the family's concerns.
- (4) Give the you and your family useful coping strategies.
- (5) Help improve compliance with treatment.
- (6) Reduce psychological problems associated with your condition.
- (7) Help you to communicate better with other health care professionals.

Counselling can also help people make sense of their condition; since many skin conditions have an uncertain cause, people often construct personal accounts

to 'explain' their condition. Some of these explanations may have a negative effect on adjustment, depending on the nature of an individual's beliefs. Part of helping people cope with their condition is therefore about making sure that mistaken beliefs about the cause of the illness or guilt don't get in the way of helping them cope. Counselling can also help to normalise people's feelings. Dermatology patients may be referred for counselling because they are finding it difficult to cope with their condition. Feelings of sadness or guilt about not being able to deal with something that others may view as trivial may prompt a referral for counselling, which in turn can help to provide both practical methods for coping with the effects of skin disease and a safe environment where patients can explore their feelings.

About the book

In this book we set out to address some of the core issues that people living with skin disease face. In Chapter 2 we begin with an examination of the commonly held myths about skin disease and the way in which these myths and portrayals of beauty in the media can make skin disease patients feel stigmatised. It is surprising how many of our strongly held beliefs about certain conditions have their basis in superstition and folklore. We unravel myth from fact and we discuss the origins of many of today's views on skin disease.

In Chapter 3 we turn our attention to the actual medical facts concerning skin disease, investigating the causes, prevalence and treatment of different conditions. Chapter 4 is dedicated to examining the concept of coping and the psychological adaptation to skin conditions. In particular we explore ways to cope with difficult social interactions. In Chapter 5 we look at how skin diseases affect relationships and ways that we can improve our interactions with others.

In Chapter 6 we examine the psychological effects of skin disease on children and young people and describe ways for carers and young people themselves to cope with their condition. In Chapter 7 we focus specifically on skin disease patients' relationship with health professionals, giving advice about the best ways to get answers to their questions and where to find the best health professional. In Chapter 8 we take a look at some of the most successful coping strategies that psychologists use to help people cope with skin disease. We take a step-by-step approach to the theory and practical aspects behind each model and discuss useful techniques for finding suitable therapists.

Chapter 9 we call our 'How do I ...?' chapter where we answer some of the most commonly asked questions from patients and their families, from issues concerning coping in specific situations to addressing the use of herbal remedies. A list of the various associations and help groups that exist around the UK, and a summary of the different services they offer, is given in the 'Useful addresses' section at the back of the book.

4 ✱ UNDERSTANDING SKIN PROBLEMS

The main focus of this book is to describe:

- The psychological impact of dermatological conditions.
- The effects of skin disease on social and familial relationships.
- How to recognise psychological problems associated with skin disease.
- The use of psychological counselling with dermatology patients.

Our hope is that this book will provide you with ideas about how to understand and cope with your condition and also make you better equipped to deal with social situations. We want to end this chapter on a positive note by saying that many people living with illnesses get on with their lives and live happy and fulfilled lives irrespective of their skin condition. It is important to acknowledge, however, that everyone reacts differently to challenges in life and this book may be useful for those who find certain aspects of living with their own or a family member's skin condition challenging. You may wish to use the book as a source of information or just for general interest, but it is important that we convey an understanding of the ways in which dermatology patients can be affected by their condition and the importance of the mind–body connection in the treatment of skin disease.

Summary

- For those that have lived with the consequences of skin disease it is obvious that the effects are more than skin deep.
- There are both social and psychological consequences of living with a skin disease.
- Counselling can play a role in helping people to cope with skin disease.